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LETTER TO MY COMMUNITY:

A Sturdy Yes of A People

By Joan Nestle

Written after viewing the Senate hearings on gays in the military, after watching a 60 Minutes segment on the Rainbow Curriculum and after reading the New York Times for the last six months.

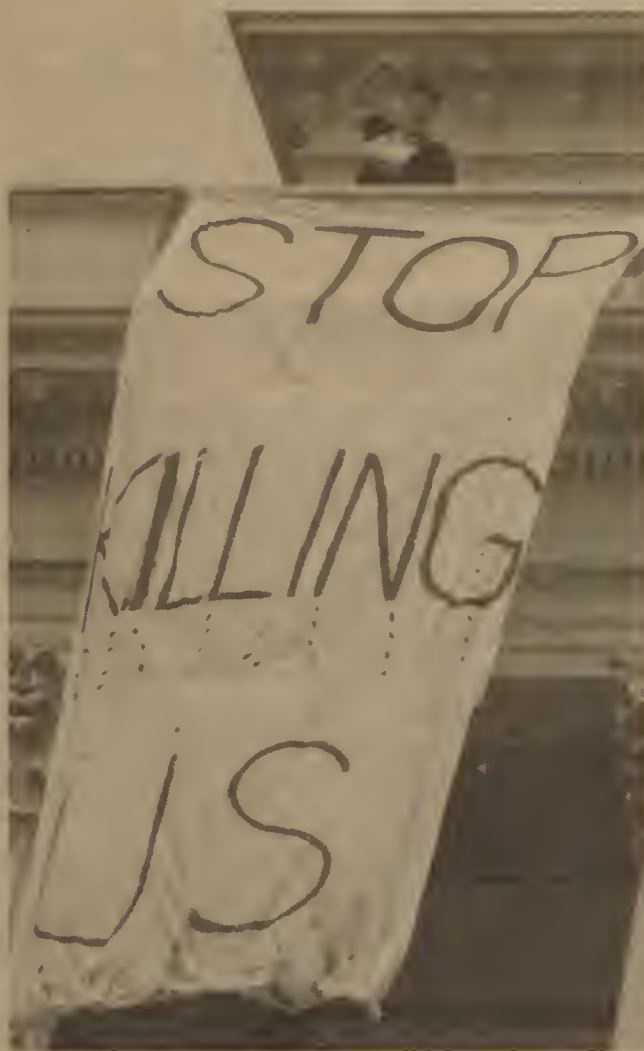


These are not easy times, but they are times that must be. All around us, institutional heads speak about our humanity as if we were not there, as if we were human objects to be moved around as their small minds and smaller hearts grapple with "the gay problem." Other people, working people, fierce in their protection of their children and in adherence to their religious leaders, pledge closedmindedness. Devout Catholic, orthodox Jew, fundamental Christian know what God has said about us. The powerful and the powerless join hands in judgment.

But we come now a full handed people. We come knowing our history, knowing our poets, knowing our communities from the past who built worlds for us to inherit; we come women who refused to be ideal or childlike or fettered; we come men who endured the loss of all for the love of some. We are the watchers of their sad shows; we are the builders of new times.

For over four decades, I have made my way in this world as a lover of women. I have spread my legs and lowered my lips for the love of women at night and taught thousands of students to write during the day. The way I loved filled the way I taught; the way I loved shaped the books I wrote; the way I loved shaped the politics of change I fought for. Hundreds of thousands of us held our passions close as we created public beauty in this country.

Offers will come to us: be silent, do not announce, tell no one and you will have a place. But silence wins no honest or safe place. Our heritage demands sound—Radclyffe Hall shouts at her lawyer, "I mean this to be a book about invert, not just friends." Oscar Wilde chides, "You cannot kill my love of young men by putting me in prison." Pat Parker



warns, "Where will you be when they come for you?" Mabel Hampton flaunts, "What do you mean, when did I come out, I was never in." Audre Lorde chants, "Silence will never save anyone." They cannot force silence into our mouths; we take lovers in our mouths, we take breasts and

cocks into our mouths, we take wetness and fullness into our mouths—but never their silence, for that will choke us.

Devout mothers and experts say we are inappropriate for children, that understanding is inappropriate for children, that meeting lesbian parents is harmful for children. Let them find out about these kind of people when they are older, they say, as if we are a kind of strange food that only adults can have a taste for. Let my son be beaten into malehood in the schoolyard, let my daughter lose her heart in the pursuit of a woman's life—but never let our children know that gender is not a prison, that love is not doled out to the same few. They—those devout mothers and experts—battle to protect a killing ground.

Other excluded people have told us that perspective is all: Frederick Douglass wrote, "That which he most loved, I most hated, that which gave him life" was death to me. The dying masters have built a house of cards, a full deck of hatreds, and are caught in its reflected images. We must know ourselves, know the solidness of our history and our gift of love, so we can walk through their mirrored house into the waiting world on the other side. Cohesion in the killing forces will fall if we appear with our names full on our lips, say the military experts, all white men, sitting in the same chairs as the other white men who judged what was real in other times—the Un-American Committee white men, the Iran-Gate white men, the Anita Hill white men. Hollow voices they have become as we move forward; like ghosts they sit upon those chairs, mouthing the credos of a losing world; but even in their airy flailings, they maim hope.

Think of what they fear from us—love and desire, rebellion and difference, play, tenderness, touch, freer children who do not call each other faggot, girls who strive for their own glory, men who do not have to hate softness. All their words and reasons for exclusions, all the tumult of their no—will fall into the shadows of history.

You—my queer comrades—have given me a world where my words could live, where my love was kissed by sun, where my anger turned to visions of possibilities. These are hard time, but necessary ones. These are the times when we BE, a sturdy Yes of a people.

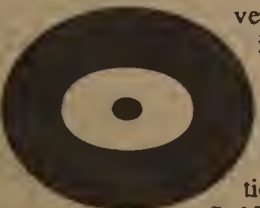
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WHAT I SAW ON GUANTANAMO BAY



"We are living in conditions where a dog couldn't live"—one of the Haitian refugees living in the U.S. government's HIV prison camp

By Suzanne Shende



Over 200 HIV positive Haitians, including pregnant women and children, are being detained on the U.S. Naval Base in Guantanamo Bay. Most of the refugees have been imprisoned in this virtual concentration camp for over 17 months, having fled Haiti in fear of their lives after the September 1991 violent overthrow of democratically elected leader Jean Bertrand Aristide. The U.S. government has already identified every person on Guantanamo as having a credible fear of persecution in Haiti, legally entitling them to pursue claims for asylum in the U.S.. Most have, in fact, passed an even higher standard through two full asylum/refugee interviews, and would have been granted asylum in the U.S., were it not for the fact that they are alleged to be HIV positive.

Keeping refugees out of the U.S. violates both domestic law and international treaties. In a show of blatant racism, only Haitians are targeted for HIV testing prior to their arrival in the U.S.. Non-Haitians, even if they are intercepted in the same waters or even in the same boats, are not subjected to the HIV screening. The Haitians on Guantanamo were forcibly tested, and then told of their status over a

loudspeaker in an airplane hangar.

...

Even though I was aware of all the deplorable facts, nothing could have prepared me for the horrifying experience of actually visiting Guantanamo in December of last year as an attorney working on the case to shut down the camp. While we met brave and defiant people, the magnitude of the atrocity was staggering. Surrounded by barbed wire and military guard towers, the refugees are housed in crude shelters that allow in rain, huge banana rats, scorpions, snakes and insects.

Marilyn Humphries

There is no privacy, no running toilets, no wash basins near the filthy "port-a-johns;" the yellowish water causes skin and stomach irritation, and group showers are taken with stagnant water. All of these conditions are obviously of even greater consequence for people with compromised immune systems.

In a meeting held with just the women there, we learned of particularly barbarous conditions: sexual harassment by the military; inappropriate AIDS drug treatments; and coercive, dangerous, illegal birth control measures. One woman reported that five days after giving birth (and being given only a cardboard box for her child), she was forced by doctors to choose between sterilization and Depo Provera. Depo Provera, long linked to cancer and other health problems, was introduced to the women there before it was approved (amid still-raging controversy) for such use in the U.S.. HIV positive women were still being directed to breastfeed, although it is a transmission route to the newborn. When the military cracked down in response to protests on the base, including a hunger strike, women were subjected to vaginal searches.

We met children of all ages, including several unaccompanied minors. One youth escaped Haiti in a leaky boat after seeing her parents killed; she had no idea she would end up alone on Guantanamo Bay, unable to join family or friends in the U.S. There have been several suicide attempts, including one by a 16 year old. As one refugee wrote, "We are living in conditions where a dog couldn't live."

The government has remained deliberately indifferent to the suffering, imminent catastrophic illnesses, and possible deaths of the refugees. An Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) spokesperson was quoted in the New York

Times with a typical attitude toward people with AIDS, "They [the Haitians] are going to die anyway, aren't they?" The life-threatening nature of the inadequate health conditions has been proved time and time again with the last minute medical evacuation of severely ill individuals and the eleventh hour release of pregnant women. There are neither medical specialists nor Creole-speaking doctors on Guantanamo. The INS and the Department of Justice have repeatedly ignored the recommendations of even the government's own military doctors to release critically ill people to the U.S.. Until a March 1993 court order, the government refused to allow people with T-cell counts under 200 to receive care in the U.S. even though it admitted in court that "medical facilities at Guantanamo are not presently sufficient to provide treatment for such AIDS patients... presently they could not receive sufficient treatment at Guantanamo Naval Base."

The Centers for Disease Control called this quarantine of HIV-positive people a public health disaster, and even top officials in the Department of Health and Human Services under Bush warned the INS of the severe public health risks of such a policy. The refugee camp has been opposed by virtually every domestic and international public health, AIDS, immigration and human rights group, including Amnesty International, the World Health Organization, the American Public Health Association, and the United Nations High Commission on Refugees.

In addition, student groups across the country have been fasting, activists have been organizing, demonstrators including Rev. Jesse Jackson, Jonathan Demme and Susan Sarandon were arrested in protests, and Sarandon with Tim Robbins caused an uproar at the Oscars by mentioning Guantanamo.

The Clinton Administration has the power to lift the ban, just as candidate and President-elect Clinton promised. It also has the authority to allow every refugee in immediately under "humanitarian parole." But as with his unfulfilled promise to lift the military ban on lesbians and gay men, Clinton continues to betray us by maintaining a policy of forcibly returning fleeing Haitians without even an asylum interview. In the meantime, the Senate and the House have also voted to retain the HIV ban.

By the time this goes to press, there could be a decision in the trial on this case, but the government is expected to appeal if the judge orders the refugees into the U.S.. In the meantime, refugees are only allowed in when they are close to death. Clinton, Attorney General Reno, White House Counsel Nussbaum and Congresspeople all must receive constant pressure.

One woman, expecting she would die from the hunger strike, or AIDS, wrote to us: "Take care of my children, so they have the strength to continue my struggle, because it is our duty." We, too, have a duty to continue her struggle, to organize locally and nationally to shut down the HIV camp. Demonstrators at this march in D.C. may well be met by rough arrests, police night sticks, and an unfriendly criminal "justice" system; peaceful protests at Guantanamo have been met by military tanks, attack dogs, and helicopters.

In the words of one of the refugees who was part of the hunger strike, "In every struggle there must be some who die. We are prepared to die so that others can be free." We, the lesbian and gay community, must join the fight for the lives and the freedom of the people on Guantanamo. A Haitian saying teaches us that "Alone we are weak, together we are strong; together, together we are the flood!" We must become the flood or we seal the doom of our Haitian sisters and brothers—and ourselves.

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WHAT'S IN A TAGLINE?

As *Gay Community News* gets ready to resume regular publication, we are working to create a tagline (that's the little descriptive line under the title) which accurately describes both our politics and our readership. We encourage you to write us with your suggestions.

Donna Cremans, an important contributor to the redesign of GCN, died earlier this month of ovarian cancer. Her intelligence, and commitment to the paper, will be greatly missed.

GAY COMMUNITY NEWS IS BACK



After a nineteen year history of uninterrupted publishing, the staff, Board of Directors and membership of *Gay Community News* decided to take a hiatus in July 1992. Accumulated debt, neglect of business and development matters, and an increasingly conservative gay and lesbian political movement had left *Gay Community News* in an unacceptably isolated and precarious position. We closed, not forever, but for an indefinite period of time that would permit re-organizing and rejuvenating of the paper's organizational/corporate parent, the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation.

Throughout the fall and winter, a group of consultants examined every aspect of *Gay Community News* and Bromfield Street and made a series of recommendations to the membership of *Gay Community News*. This Spring we elected a Board of Directors and began fundraising in earnest to free the paper from its debt burden and to relaunch *Gay Community News* as a bi-weekly publication of progressive theory, cultural criticism, and political commentary. In addition to publishing GCN, the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation will sponsor OutWrite, the Lesbian and Gay Writer's Conference; will continue the longstanding Lesbian/Gay Prisoners Project; and will organize "GCN Off The Page," a political forum series slated to begin in Boston and expand nationally.

We invite all readers, old and new, to whet your appetites with this special March on Washington promotional issue of *Gay Community News*. In it, we present some of the brightest and funniest minds of our political movement. With it, we make a commitment to you that the new *Gay Community News* will maintain this very high level of queer community journalism. As quickly as we can, we will begin publishing our new and stimulating bi-weekly *Gay Community News*.

For those of you who share our dismay with the state of the gay and lesbian press and miss GCN's special blend of progressive politics and on-the-edge culture, we urge you to help meet our publishing goal as soon as possible by making a tax-deductible donation to the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation. You'll find a one-time (very cheap) introductory subscription offer on the back page.

From all of us to all of you, it's great to be back!



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UP AGAINST HATE: LESSONS FROM OREGON'S MEASURE NINE CAMPAIGN

An Interview with Suzanne Pharr



Marilyn Humphries



he Christian right wing political movement, with its focus on local and state organizing and campaigns, grows stronger and more dangerous with each passing day. Following the Fall '92 victories in Colorado and Tampa, Christian right-wing activists have already begun gathering

signatures on initiative petitions to put anti-gay measures before voters in seven states and 33 municipalities around the country: 32 cities in Oregon for a Fall '93 initiative; the state of Oregon, Fall '94; Idaho, '94; Washington, '94; Michigan, '94; California, '94; Florida, '94; and the city of Lewiston, Maine, Fall '93.

In Oregon last November voters defeated Measure 9, the statewide initiative that defined homosexuality as "abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse... and to be discouraged and avoided." Measure 9 also forbade the use of "property and monies" "to encourage and facilitate homosexuality," a provision many feared could be used to shut down gay bars or to ban lesbians and gay men from public employment.

Suzanne Pharr, an organizer and activist in the battered women's movement in Arkansas and throughout the South, recently moved to Oregon after working on the Fall '92 Question 9 campaign there. She is the author of Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism.

Marla Erlie: How did you happen to get involved in the campaign in Oregon?

Suzanne Pharr: I went to Oregon under the sponsorship of the Lesbian Community Project and the Coalition for Human Dignity, to develop strategies for defeating the Religious Right and Ballot Measure Nine. The main work in the first six months was to start up a group called the "Oregon Democracy Project," which was to look at how to organize against the religious Right over the long term rather than just for the election. In the first six months I didn't work with the [official] campaign against Measure Nine except to talk with them occasionally and share ideas. In August I went to the Republican convention, where lesbians and gay men got attacked by the police. Again I got to see a lot of the religious Right up close. Then I went back to Oregon and worked directly on the campaign, from the inside.

Many people in the state did not work from inside the campaign, because the campaign seemed not to know how to incorporate them or in some cases chose not to incorporate them. For example, it was six months into the campaign before they hired a volunteer coordinator to organize the thousands of people who wanted to be involved. I've never seen a place riper for engagement and organizing, but there was no way to put people into action. So the campaign violated what I think is one of the bottom line principles of organizing which is "do no harm." I think to waste anyone who wants to get involved in social change does harm since it was an opportunity to build a grand movement.

Lesbian/Gay Erasure

Some people chose to work outside the campaign because they disagreed with it. For example people resented the fact that the words "lesbian" and "gay" weren't used in the media advertising at all -- the campaign spent a million dollars on the media and they never used those words. Some people also resented the fact that the principal media spokesperson for the campaign was a woman who was always characterized by the campaign as a 62 year old heterosexual grandmother. While the right wing Oregon Citizen's Alliance (OCA) was talking about specific details of lesbian and gay lives constantly in an effort to demonize us, the Campaign was saying, "This isn't about lesbians and gay men. It's about discrimination." This gave the appear-

ance that we had much to hide, that we were afraid to talk about the real issues.

However, you must remember that despite over fifteen years (since Anita Bryant) of religious Right attacks against lesbians and gay men, our communities across the country were caught off guard and out of position in 1992. Consequently, we were all dancing as fast as could to build organizations and theory and strategies to defend ourselves. So of course we were going to make mistakes--but hopefully we can learn from these mistakes by talking about them

What was the official campaign's response to people working outside of it?

Much of the time, they saw them as competitive, as not delivering the right message, not taking guidance from the campaign. Part of that was because people had said "screw the campaign--we're fighting for our lives." I think that became a message: you can't stop people from fighting for their lives. You may try to run a really tightly controlled campaign, but when people are under attack, they are going to rise up--unless they are so totally oppressed that there is no rising up--so they rose up all around the state. I would say that some of the major pieces of organizing that happened were external to the campaign. Many of us felt that, while the campaign accomplished some things, the vote was won almost in spite of it.

"People In The Pews"

How conscious were organizers about how to put out a message to reach people?

The campaign was very conscious about its decision not to use the words "lesbian" and "gay" in the media advertising. They said that the polls gave them the information that you can't win as a gay and lesbian issue. The rest of us thought, "Of course, the polls are going to say that at this particular point in time." But what you have to do is education: you have to change the hearts and minds of people so that they understand that it's about gay men and lesbians, and it's about democracy, and it's about civil rights for everyone, and it's about attacks against affirmative action, and it's also about attacks against reproductive choice.

There were three organizing groups that I thought were tremendously successful and I want to make sure that we get them in here. One was People of Faith Against Bigotry. They wanted to do education for what they called "people in the pews," the people who actually went to churches or synagogues. I think its success came from these particular things: first, they defined themselves as a group of faith communities, not as Christian or Jewish or Moslem or pagan, but as all of these. Second, they did not target the leadership, but the lay people. Then they decided that they wanted to be a voice on the moral issues, because the Christian Right was saying "we represent morality." They put a full page signature ad in the statewide newspaper that said "The OCA [Oregon Citizens' Alliance] Does Not Speak For Me," signed People of Faith Against Bigotry, and it had hundreds and hundreds of names of people and their faith affiliations. It was very powerful, and it was a wonderful way to educate people as they gathered the signatures. Then they went to the places of faith and said, "decide where you stand." They didn't tell people what to think, but pushed them to look at the issue.

They were perfectly willing to talk about lesbians and gay men; they made that conscious choice. What they did was to have either prayer vigils or sermons or whatever where they stood united with the lesbian and gay community, because they had realized over time how they had caused harm--that they had always excluded lesbians and gay men from the faith communities. It was very wonderful organizing.

The Country and the City: Rural Organizing

Another powerful force outside the campaign was the rural organizing which came under the Oregon Democracy Project. We came to that when we started thinking about how you can't enter a rural community unless you have a point of entry. I think that's true with lots of communities: you don't just bust in the door and say "listen to me." There were labor unions around the state, but not in little, tiny communities. We had to find state-wide organizations that had local groups in even the smallest towns.

It occurred to me that one of the things that already existed, as in almost every state, was the Battered Women's Coalition. In Oregon the Coalition involved thirty different towns. For the last fifteen years the battered women's movement has done training on racism, sexism and homophobia all over the country. Also, in order to survive in whatever town it's in, it has to work with everybody: the police, the courts, the churches, the social workers, everybody. Many people don't think of battered women's shelters as part of the progressive movement and they are rarely included at the table. I think this disregard is because 1) they are woman-created and woman-led, 2) they do service delivery, 3) they work most often with poor and working class women. But what other group is represented in small towns or cities all over the country and has a fifteen year history of work against sexism, racism, and homophobia?

We decided to go in and say to the shelters "Would you help us pull together people, not just those who are opposed to Ballot Measure Nine, but people who are concerned about justice and concerned about democracy and concerned about their communities." Then we asked them to make sure that no one is excluded: bring in all the people that you can and think of all the pockets of the community that might be concerned about justice and bring them into the same room.

Then two or three of us who were riding the road at that time would go into the community and would talk about the religious Right. We would talk about who they are, how they are configured, their history nationally and their history in Oregon, and then about what's happening with Ballot Measure Nine. We'd ask "Now, what kind of community do you want to live in? What kind of organization do you want to create that will last across time to do organizing to create that community and also defend you from this attack from the Right?" That was one of the strongest pieces of organizing, and it's still going on now. There are 33 towns that have groups of people that are called "Human Dignity Organizations" and they're working on justice issues and standing up against the religious Right.

Have the traditional Civil Rights organizations related to that in some way?

Yes, but in a lot of those towns there are no traditional civil rights organizations. The closest might be the battered women's group or an attorney here and there.

In urban centers, traditional civil rights groups worked against the ballot measure, as did other organizations within communities of color. There was an "African-Americans Against Nine" group, and the Asian-American community brought together a dozen organizations to speak in support of their lesbian and gay community members. This work happened despite the marginalization of people of color generally within the Campaign. Those communities were initially written off because they were not seen as critical to the vote, and then later were asked to show support when they were thought to be needed. Tokenization was rampant.

Many people talk about how the religious Right splits communities off from each other. I don't believe they do the splitting; instead, they simply work the splits that are already there. For example, because of the deep-rooted racism in the lesbian and gay community--in which white people disregard and marginalize lesbians and gay men of color--the religious Right finds it easy to accentuate and increase that division community-wide.

I think one of the things the religious Right does extremely well is play on an urban/rural split. What they did in Oregon was very smart. They ran the state-wide amendment and they lost, but they got a million people to vote and then they came back saying "now we're going into the towns." Currently, they are in 30 towns and counties doing referenda in the places where they gained support by running it on the state level. That was very, very smart.

Do you think that through this work people have developed a broader understanding of the full racist, sexist and homophobic agenda of the religious Right?

I think they did. There came to be an understanding that we're not speaking out just because one group is targeted and we're afraid we'll be next. It became more than a patronizing "Oh, let's take care of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters." This is about the very fabric of democracy.

The third group that I think did outstanding organizing was called "Speak Out Oregon," started by some lawyers

Continued on page 11

HERE COME... THE LESBIAN AVENGERS!

By Sarah Schulman

At Gay Pride in New York last year, six lesbian activists handed out 8,000 club cards that said, "Lesbians! Dykes! Gay Women! We want revenge and we want it now." Move over for

The Lesbian Avengers, a direct action group created to empower lesbians to participate in political rebellion on our own behalf. Not yet a year old, the New York group now stands at 250 members and chapters have been created in Durham, Atlanta, Austin, Tuscon, San Francisco and Montreal.

In New York, the Avengers primarily target expressions of the Religious Right's coalition against lesbians and gay men. Our first action took place on the opening day of school last September in the midst of the New York City fight over whether or not lesbians and gay men will be included in the public school curriculum. About 50 Avengers arrived, with a marching band, to the most anti-gay school district in Queens. We handed balloons that said "Ask about lesbian lives" to young school children. (Some parents let their kids keep the balloons, some did not.) Despite the veneer of a friendly action, we were confronting the biggest taboo in the culture: homosexuals in the schoolyard. We were also acknowledging that school and family are not places of safety for lesbian and gay children. As their community, we must act on their behalf.

Later last fall, the New York Avengers took on coordination of national publicity after the fire-bombing murders of a lesbian and a gay man in Oregon. The murders occurred just a month before the state's vote on a vicious anti-gay measure. The first thing we did was build a shrine to our martyrs and hold a three-day outdoor vigil. Then we marched with flaming torchlight down Fifth Avenue at rush

the LESBIAN AVENGERS



hour, without a permit, to Rockefeller Center where we again installed the shrine.

When the mayor of Denver came to town to raise money for tourism in Colorado—a state whose anti-gay measure passed last November—we dogged his every step, even getting up to his suite at The Plaza Hotel while his bodyguards drank coffee in a cafe. When *Self* Magazine announced a ski week in Colorado, we occupied their office and the project was immediately cancelled.

For the March on Washington, we have produced a four-page broadside filled with concrete information on how to

form a lesbian direct action group. We have printed 50,000 copies and will be distributing them to dykes far and wide, trying to make that national push past visibility to the next step of movement building.

There are some organizing principles that have really helped the Avengers to grow and prosper. We don't always stick to them, but when we do, things go a lot more smoothly. One of the most useful maxims has been to avoid theoretical discussion at all costs. We only have political debate when we are discussing the concrete application of an action. In addition, the clear focus of every one of our actions has been on people who are actively hurting us; we have stayed away from the disempowering stance of going after other gay or lesbian movement groups.

One of our greatest challenges has to do with empowering lesbians to be pro-active and constructive. Anyone who has ever done political organizing knows that some people are so disempowered that they can only take a negative stance, can only destroy and obstruct. They can't image their ideas really coming into fruition so they exercise their frustration by reacting against what other people are trying to do. In the Avengers, we have worked hard to encourage ourselves not to do critiques of other people's proposals but instead, suggest alternative solutions. In other words, to act as though our ideas can make a difference.

When that doesn't work we have a harder job ahead, which is to step out of the classic female behavior roles and simply not allow egomania and factionalizing. It is difficult for women to be strong in this way, but while people working together do not have to have agreement, they do have to have trust. Each of us will have to learn to stand up for the kind of organizing community that we want or our movement will not survive for very long.

The visual design of our actions is another crucial part of Avenger work. From the beginning we have used colors, slogans and images not previously associated with lesbian

Continued on page 11

The Answer Queen Tells All: HOW TO HAVE SEX AT THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

by Christopher Wittke

dear Answer Queen,
I am a member of the Bent Community ("Whatever we are, we ain't straight!"), and I was wondering if I will be able to count on having lots and lots of sex (safe, sane and consensual, of course!) at "The 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi (not sexual) Civil Rights and Liberation, Etc., Etc., Etc."?
—Wondering Sincerely

Dear Wonder Sin,

First of all, why bother? If you insist on searching for sex at a large gathering of queer types, you're bound to be disappointed. People are too darn distracted by their busy organizing, organizing, organizing. And I don't mean ORGANizing. It has been scientifically proven through anecdotal accounts—just like Simon Levay!—that at the logistical nightmare that was the 1987 March on Washington, almost nobody had sex. Not gay men, not lesbians, not even bisexuals.

Lesbians, in general, were too frazzled from taking care of their kids. As for the unfashionable lesbians—those who had not elected to have children in time for the 1987 March—well, they were frantically giving around-the-clock civil disobedience training to gay men so the queens wouldn't get everybody's heads bashed in by acting out their Stonewall fantasies on the steps of the Supreme Court the day after the March.

Gay men, in general, didn't have sex at all between the years of 1982 and late- 1987. We had felt so disenfranchised and demoralized for so long that we forgot to have sex right up to and including the weekend of the March. That is, except for my then-boyfriend, who found it necessary to "cheat" on our non-monogamous relationship by having sex with some slut from St. Louis and then denying it to my face to this day. As if I couldn't find the hidden letters later. But I digress. It was, in fact, the awe-inspiring empowerment of the '87 March experience that led many gay men to go back to their home cities with their first erections in almost a decade. Thus, the return of back rooms and sex for pleasure's sake. But before then...nothing.

Bisexuals, of course, were really bummed out that the faggots and dykes were too distracted to have sex. See, all of the bi's had already had sex with each other and were hoping the weekend would provide some new meat. Instead, as is so typical, they were forced into long theoretical discussions about whether or not they actually existed. In other words, the 1987 March on Washington was business as usual, but on a much larger scale. And if you think the 1993 edition is going to be any different, guess again. Count on having lots and lots of stultifying conversations about your right to be a Marine or Navy SEAL. Feel your eyes glaze over when that sexy number you're cruising informs everyone within ear shot, "We're just like straight people, except for what we do in bed. And even that's not that different." Sublimate your desires like everybody else. And pack a vibrator.

Ms. Understanding: SENSITIVE ADVICE FOR THE SEXUALLY MARGINAL —"NO QUESTION IS TOO STUPID"

by Susieday

dear Ms. Understanding,
Recently my lover and I were married in what I can only call an "uncivil ceremony." There we were, Roy and I, elegant in our new tuxedos, the cut-glass punch-bowl reflecting the light of a perfect spring day, orchestra music wafting strains of "Oh Promise Me"—when suddenly our "friends" burst into the room, singing crude songs and wearing everything from bowling outfits to Mardi Gras gear. The minister resembled nothing so much as Tinkerbell in heat, and read to us out of the *Betty Crocker Cookbook*. My parents were there, after months of my pleading for them to

come, but they pretended to be Swedish caterers, and wouldn't speak a word of English the entire time. Worst of all, the only gift we received was a gold lame whoopee Cushion. Is this someone's idea of a joke? I have never been so embarrassed.

—Blushing Groom

Dear Blushing,

Three lashes with a wet whip for your friends and family. Marriage is a sacred institution, and should be treated as such. Your guests should have shown more respect. Don't they realize that, since openly gay and lesbian people aren't allowed on quiz shows, a traditional wedding is about the only way we have of obtaining all those blenders, toasters, micro-waves, and other modern appliances that straight people are given as a matter of course? How insensitive! The next time you get married, don't settle for anything less.

HOWARD CRUSE



CALLING MY POEMS HOME

Community artist Kate Rushin on her new book of poetry, *The Black Back-Ups*



An interview by Rebecca Johnson



Kate Rushin is the quintessential community artist: a gifted and generous poet/teacher whose contributions are too many to count. Her work in communities of color and with women's groups in greater Boston includes seven years as a Poet-in-the Schools of Massachusetts, ten years as a member of the New Words bookstore collective, and eight years in women's community radio.

A celebrated poet, she was a writing fellow at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center in 1978, and won the Artists Foundation Fellowship that same year. She won the Grolier Poetry Prize in 1988. Her poetry, as well as reviews and commentary, is published in journals, anthologies and community newspapers.

*Over the years, one of the most frequent requests at New Words Bookstore was for Kate's long-anticipated book of poetry. The wait is over as all of Kate's communities celebrate publication of her wonderful collection, *The Black Back-Ups* (Firebrand Books, Ithaca, NY 1993).*

Rebecca: Kate, when did you start this collection, *The Black Back-Ups*.

The oldest pieces go as far back as 1974. Most of the prose poems, which I also call my family poems, were written in the early '70s. For a long time I called them "the Lizzie's girl poems". My intent in those poems was to talk about the people and images that I remembered from growing up in a tiny African-American town, Lawnside, New Jersey. Even when I started writing them back in the '70s, I was aware of how the town was changing, and people were getting older and people were dying. By that time, a number of people in my family had already died. And so it was very important to me to preserve something of that world.

I was also very aware that there was a lot of writing about Black people, particularly men, in urban settings. And there were people writing about Black people from the South. But there wasn't much that I saw about small town, Northern girls or women--who weren't also middle class, and who weren't also totally destitute --

Rich, destitute or light-skinned (both laughing)

My town is a community that grew up after the Civil War as a result of Black people coming North with the help of Black and white abolitionists and Quakers in the Philadelphia/Haddonfield area. The town actually has had several names and was only incorporated in the 1920s. But the community itself goes way back. And even growing up, I was aware of how unique the town was: it was a self-governing African -American community. Many people worked outside the community. A number of the women did day's work, for instance. Others owned small businesses in the town. My grandparents had a little grocery store. There was the man who had the gas station.

There was a flavor in the town that I think outsiders would characterize as Southern, although I don't necessarily think the people who lived in the town would see it that way. People still had vegetable gardens and cesspools and most of the town was not paved--you walked in the road. And most people knew everybody else. For instance, my seventh grade English teacher was also the organist in my church. And my eighth grade teacher, her sister, was my Sunday School teacher. Everything was intertwined. My uncle, who owned the dry cleaners, was the custodian at the school. My grandmother had been a cook there. My grandfather, who was on the town council, delivered the town's newspapers.

Can you talk about what you're trying to accomplish through writing poetry and if you're writing other forms now?

I have made attempts to write short fiction in the past, and I have a longstanding interest in theater and film. I was

in theater in college during the late '60s, early '70s, when the brothers wrote and directed and the sisters acted. I've just recently begun playwriting and screenwriting since I've been at graduate school. I think at some point I'll also make the time to write fiction.

But why poetry? I've liked poetry since I was a kid, I was always drawn to it. I liked Edgar Allen Poe and Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, and I liked rhymes and I used to memorize poems. I started keeping a journal in high school for class and I started writing poems about my feeling of loneliness, of trying to communicate better with other people. And poetry seemed manageable to me and it seemed accessible to me. When I was younger, I could not imagine how someone wrote a novel. I loved them, but I couldn't imagine how someone could know all of it and structure all of it, tell those elaborate, layered stories. Now I understand that it's a process.

Who, in your adult writing life, has inspired you?

In the '70s, the Black Arts movement poets -- Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rogers, and Nikki Giovanni. All the different Black artists, writers and thinkers who came to Oberlin when I was in college were very important to me. I read the white Southern writers: Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Truman Capote. And novelists. Toni Morrison. *Bluest Eye* and *Sula*--I still love them. I think *Sula* will always mean more to me than *Song of Solomon*.

Sula is my absolute favorite.

Alice Walker's short stories inspired me, too. When I read *In Love and Trouble*, I felt like a changed person. I saw "For Colored Girls ... " in '76 when it was on Broadway. In the last ten years, it would be Audre. Audre Lorde. And Toni Cade Bambara. The writers in *Home Girls* and *This Bridge Called my Back*. These writers really made a difference for so many people. Being around on college campuses and meeting young Black and students of color who have gay groups and are organizing lets me know that progress has been made and there is more of a space for people of color to be out. Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith, Pat Parker and Jewelle Gomez, Cherrie Moraga, Cheryl Clarke—and all the rest of us who people haven't necessarily heard of—made such a difference.

Do you want to talk a little bit about Audre, when you discovered her poetry and what meeting her meant to you?

Way back, I had a copy of *From A Land Where Other People Live* and *New York Head Shop and Museum*. But I didn't know she was a lesbian back then.

I first met her and read with her at the Black women's poetry reading that Barbara Smith and other women had organized to raise money for the families of the twelve Black women who were murdered in Boston. That was back in 1979. Then the next night Audre and Adrienne Rich gave a benefit reading at Sanders Theater.

I have been reading and thinking about spirituality and part of that has to do with Audre. My spiritual life is increasingly important to me and *our* spiritual life as Black women is increasingly important to me. One of the things Audre talked about in her books and poems was how to cultivate and express and use your life power. Learning how to claim it. I think the way she lived her life was an example of the importance of claiming the power that you do have and not focussing so much on your limitations.

Also very important to me is the writing she did about how we treat each other, on a day-to-day basis--as friends, lovers, political people, comrades, allies. She wrote about how important that is, how it's something that needs attention and thinking about. I'm thinking of essays such as "Eye to Eye," "Uses of the Erotic," and "Poetry Is Not a Luxury."

When I write I first have to do it for myself, and then after that, there's some audience. After you write for yourself, whom do you write for?

Certainly my family, people from my town and the Black community in general, is my audience. And certainly the women's community. It's very important to me to be communicating with other Black women, whoever they are. It's also important to me to reach young people and children. I hope that younger Black people who read my poems are inspired to talk to people in their own families, in their own communities, and to record, write, film, tape their stories. I hope they will feel that there's some value and beauty in the ways of the older generations. And I hope they get that poetry doesn't have to be some difficult, hard-to understand, removed-from-life thing.

I have some poems that are, in a sense, geared toward a white audience. In many ways the "Bridge" poem is. It's an explaining poem. Although many many Black people and other people of color relate to the poem, the stance of the poem is actually doing the explaining that the poem is protesting. I think it could be dangerous to a writer of color to be in that stance for too long.

The explaining stance?

The stance of explaining yourself to an other, rather than talking to your own community. The same can be said about writing as a lesbian. There's a place for us in talking to straight people, but it would be dangerous for that to go on unconsciously or for too long because there's a certain kind of power you get from talking to people in your community, who are more likely to understand you, who share your experience.

Well, I think we have to talk about being out in print.

The publication of *The Black Back-Ups* makes me more out to more people than I have been out to in my life. It's not *easy* for me, but I needed to move forward. This book includes at least one poem about every aspect of my life -- there was no way I could leave out my lesbian identity. I'm very aware that the book will get a different reception in certain quarters because of that, including within my family (who have been very supportive) and including people in my town. I have a poem, which is not in the book -- I actually wish it was-- where I talk about being worried about people who would judge me or reject me because I'm a lesbian. (see "I Just Don't Know," this page)

I feel like it's important for me to be talking about being a lesbian within a Black context and within a family context and a community context. Maybe all that is not worked out in the individual poems, but they exist in this one volume so they resonate off each other.

As a body they speak to all those connections.

I think part of my journey that's represented by publication of this book is figuring out how to make those connections, or learning that I can. When I first started coming out to myself in Provincetown in the mid '70s, I was so isolated. I wondered how I was going to be a lesbian back home in front of Black people. I couldn't see it then. I had no answer. In a sense, the publication of *The Black Back-Ups* is part of my answer to my own question. □

Kate Rushin and Shay Youngblood will offer writing workshops this June for Domis Gracias, a writers and artists workspace in upstate New York. For details, write R.D. 131, Gilboa, NY 12076.

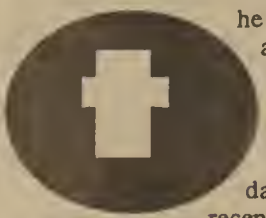
I JUST DON'T KNOW

I worry
I worry about all the Fantastic People
Who might not want to talk to me
Or publish me
Or be my friend
Those people who might disown me
Or be disgusted
Or much worse and more probable
Be disappointed
After I start reading these poems outloud
These women poems
Why do they keep coming
Even I don't understand it
Why can't I think of any
Safe
Comfortable
Tree Poems
Or Broken Wheelbarrow Poems
Or Prices-Are-Too-High Poems
And tell me
Why are my Men Poems
So tight-teethed and sad
And even my Revolutionary Black Poems
Are starting to sound like
Woman Poems
Loving you poems
I hadn't planned to write
These poems until later
Break The Family In easy
But here I am running my mouth
A poet
And I can't think of one non-committal
Barn Door or
Rock Poem
You know sometimes
Sometimes I wish I was into
Business & Finance
You know loving women on the side
At least I could've been into
Abstract Sculpture
Then nobody would've had to know
What these shapes mean
Except you and me
But what am I supposed to do
They just keep coming
These everything I got
Women Poems
Loving-You-Poems

—Kate Rushin

MEMORIALS FROM HELL

By David Feinberg



he invitation was tasteful and plain, a white card with no photograph. "A memorial service will be held for Paul on such-and-such a date at 5:30 p.m. A short reception will follow." The address was that of a fashionable Soho gallery space. The envelope was stamped with a familiar man's name and Paul's familiar address. I assume the man was Paul's last lover. I suppose I dreaded the reception more than the service. For some reason, I was compelled to go, as if I had been summoned.

I knew Paul was positive, but I hadn't realized he was ill until I read his obituary in the *New York Times*. I always expected him to outlive me, even though I hadn't had any regular contact with him in years. The last time I saw him was at a detestable downtown performance piece.

I came a bit too early: ten minutes before the ceremony was scheduled to start. No photos of Paul greeted me at the entrance. I'm sure this was a deliberate choice. Avedon's too expensive and Mapplethorpe's dead. I wonder what photo I would use: an embarrassing nude? But I suppose the point of memorials is not to humiliate those who come.

People were clustering in small groups, trying to find who they knew. No one had sat down yet. At weddings, sections are designated for friends and family of the groom and the bride. It occurred to me that memorials could divide seats into couples and singles to facilitate cruising. One night stands could sit in the back, near the hors d'oeuvres.

I know this is the height of hypocrisy, but please do not invite tricks and one-night-stands to my memorial. There is something sad about single men with sideburns sitting in scattered seats as if at an afternoon showing of some obscure Deanna Durbin movie. I can imagine myself at home, dragging my IV behind me into my office, tossing out inappropriate names from my Rolodex in a frenzied fit. Should I mark names in my address book with colored markers? I'm such a control queen, I just might write out the invitations myself in my hospital bed, surrounded by life-support equipment. And when the battery of my laptop needs recharging, I'll rely on my friend who has medical power of attorney to help me decide which device to unplug: the portable television, the oxygen or the respirator. I would probably write the reminiscences myself if I thought I could get away with it.

We've all been to memorials where the slightest of acquaintances testifies with a personal recollection. I just think it would be in poor taste for someone I had met on the phone sex line to speak: "I knew him as Fred."

I finally sat down and a woman sitting in front of me said hi. I had no idea who she was. Luckily I ran into my friend Jay, who sat next to me. Jay, it developed, had had a two-week affair with Paul; I had had a three week affair. Jay had borrowed someone else's invitation; I had received mine in the mail. I guess three weeks was the cutoff date. Paul dumped Jay because he was too fat; Paul dumped me because "we came from different milieus."

Paul had a talent for seduction. He seduced Scott in an elevator with the aid of his pocket knife. He seduced Jay while interviewing him for an article on ACT UP. I believe he relied purely on charm in seducing me. It was all over very fast. Paul kept on speeding up the progress of our relationship until he finally reached escape velocity. By that point I was securely fastened to the seat of a Mack truck headed straight for a brick wall. And I was supposed to be nice to him?

Paul had mastered the art of rudeness. He was brilliant. He was compelling. He had an incredible amount of personal charisma. He was not unlike Hitler. His friends loved him and were intensely loyal to him. His discards avoided him like the plague. He was the first person I knew who had call waiting to put me on hold and then forget about me; he liked having me come over to his apartment for lunch so he could be interrupted continually by phone calls. "We were from different milieus" because I didn't point my silverware down in the European manner, I used the savage American style with the fork tines up. I don't understand the consistency of this approach given gravity and the tendency of soup to return to the bowl when the spoon is facing down.

Four women and one man addressed the crowd, leading one to wonder whether he had any male friends save the odd executor. Astonishingly enough, most of them mentioned Paul's rudeness during their speeches. One said she was surprised to find out Paul's age from the *Times* obituary; he had always led her to believe that he was older. All of the speakers were incredibly eloquent, so eloquent that they all elicited applause one might expect at a Broadway memorial. Of course, it would have been rude to greet subsequent speakers with silence after the first. Is it appropriate to applaud the cleverness of a speaker at a memorial service? Would Paul have approved? I doubt it. I still recall my ninth grade choir teacher who stopped the evening performance dead in



"Please do not invite tricks and one-night-stands to my memorial. There is something sad about single men with sideburns sitting in scattered seats as if at an afternoon showing of some obscure Deanna Durbin movie."

its tracks to glare at the audience of parents who dared applaud between movements. I have since relented in the silly judgment that under these circumstances clapping is boorish. The only boorish behavior would be to leave at the end of the ceremony, skipping the reception. In my private tribute to Paul, I left post haste.

...

I had been overwhelmed by life. There were just too many things to do. Somehow I hadn't gotten around to visiting David and Luis. David was a peripheral friend-of-a-friend whom I knew only remotely, enough to say hello to at the gym or at ACT UP. I was hoping to visit him with my friend Wayne. Tom advised me against seeing Luis because he was doing so poorly. Perhaps Tom was overcompensating for asking me to visit his friend Charles *after* promising Charles I would see him. Tom shared a lot of his difficulties in dealing with Charles, and since they were such close friends he rarely mentioned the good; consequently, I had an extremely poor opinion of Charles and was reluctant to visit. Hospital visits require an enormous amount of emotional energy; I felt that they should be done selectively. Still, I knew Luis's lover Jon and, however bad Luis was, I could always comfort Jon.

So I added "visit David and Luis" to my "To Do" list on Sunday night. On Monday at noon I found out that David

had died that morning. With double my determination, I went to see Luis that afternoon, after work. One hospital information person referred me to another; he told me that Luis "had expired" yesterday. He had expired. Like a library book.

...

I went to David's memorial service with Wayne. It was in a church on 110th Street, complete with organ, chorus, and fey minister. Out of respect for those who had organized the service, I took a red ribbon and impaled it on my jacket. Wayne didn't. The music reminded me of a bad daytime soap opera. Our friend Ron told me how David was the bus captain for the Kennebunkport demonstration, and how he quietly administered his one-hour drip of DHPG on the bus ride up. People applauded after various speakers because it was expected. David had, after all, toured with *Starlight Express*. I stood when everyone else stood for a religious moment. Wayne remained seated.

The service lasted three hours. *Angels in America* was quoted, even though it hadn't yet opened in New York. Afterwards I rushed to a Publishing Triangle party, where I was chastised by another cynic for wearing a red ribbon.

I vowed that my service would be different. Guests would be told that in the last few months of my life I became deeply interested in worshipping Satan. Instead of handing out red ribbons, ushers would be instructed to write "666" in charcoal on the foreheads of the guests. There might be a pagan sacrifice of a baby lamb. Instead of an organ, there would be a kazoo. Oh, and Liza has to sing "But the World Goes Round."

If David's memorial was the *Nicholas Nickleby* of memorials, my memorial would be the *Angels in America* of memorials: two consecutive nights with no intermission. My friend Michael told me that he had topped me: his memorial was to be a subscription series.

...

Don't die in late November or December: scheduling the memorial service will be hell. In addition to seasonal shopping, holiday parties, last-minute tax deductible benefits, Stop

The Church anniversary demos and outlaw sex parties, you'll have to contend with Seasonal Affective Disorder. My friend Jan color codes events in his datebook: December is a kaleidoscopic blur of stacked events. I had to go to a seasonal party and a birthday party after Luis's memorial, which started promptly Latino/Latina time an hour after it was scheduled. Was I out of my fucking mind? It made no sense.

Luis's memorial was at the Manhattan Center for the Living, a million psychic miles from Frank Campbell's Funeral Home. People were encouraged to come in drag. I thought this was only for the lipsynching performers so I stuck to the traditional black jeans and black leather jacket. Luis had been totally outrageous, and his memorial service was completely over the top. My friend Tom "channeled" Stevie Nicks, dancing like a lunatic, wearing four skirts, black stockings, a cowl, and what seemed like three feet of teased blond hair. He then proceeded to strip to his jockstrap while telling the poignant tale of how he awoke after an emergency appendectomy to Luis playing with his nipples, and how he fainted as he saw his father blanch, sitting at the base of the hospital bed. Heidi danced in leather chaps over pink panties. Jon, the widow, dressed in widow's weeds replete with black veil, did a lipsynched duet to Natalie and Nat Cole's "Unforgettable" with a posterboard photo of Luis that had a hinged manipulable mouth.

The Manhattan Center for the Living follows the Marianne Williams approach to illness. At one point in the memorial Jon read a letter that Luis had written to his illness, and the illness's reply. Absurdly, in this age of AIDS, Luis had leukemia. Luis had quit dancing professionally to become a full-time AIDS activist. I first met him in Atlanta, where he had flown for a series of ACT UP demonstrations to repeal the sodomy law and change the CDC definition of AIDS. Luis was an extraordinarily sexy man, filled with a tremendous capacity for joy and endless delight. There is no justice when someone like Luis has to die at 27. How can there possibly be a god with leukemia and AIDS?

If some sadistic spiritualist forced me to write a letter to my own illness, I think the exchange would go like this:

Dear HIV: Fuck you! I wish you were dead so I could live a normal life. I am terrified of dying. Yours in hell, David.

Dear David: Now why don't you just be mature and adopt a new age view and learn to accept me? Your faithful retrovirus, HIV.

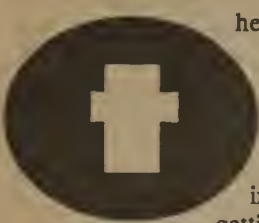
Dear HIV: As John Weir once said when I asked him if he had slept with a woman, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never.

The title of this piece is redundant. All memorials are Memorials From Hell. □

LESBIANS AND BREAST CANCER:

How about real studies on real lesbians?

By Tatiana Schreiber



The Boston *Globe* reported in early February that "Breast cancer risk in lesbians [is] put at 1 in 3." This headline on an Associated Press story referred to a (still incomplete and unpublished) "study" suggesting lesbians have a lifetime risk of getting breast cancer that is two to three times the risk faced by heterosexual women. Given current estimates that one in nine women will get cancer by the time she is 85, the AP reporter apparently multiplied the average risk by three to come up with the startling statistic.

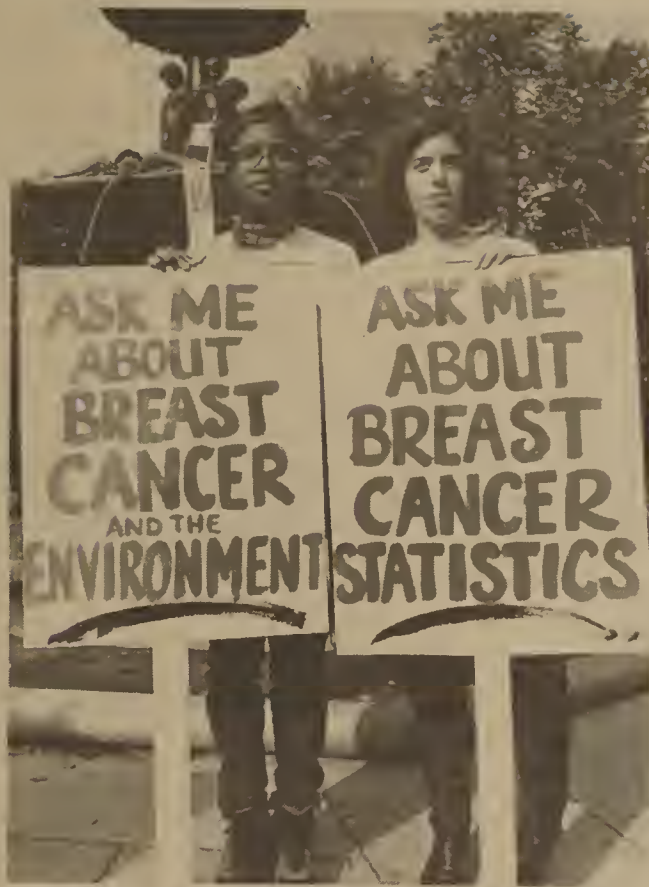
The news, which was also reported in several gay papers last fall, has been hailed by some lesbian cancer activists as an indication that at last someone is paying attention to lesbian health issues. Others have called the reports misleading, saying the study was based on surveys of lesbian lifestyle and behavior that are not necessarily accurate. Both views may have validity.

Actually, there was no "study" in the sense that no one has investigated actual breast cancer incidence among lesbians. Dr. Suzanne Haynes, an epidemiologist with the National Cancer Institute, was asked by the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation (NLGHF) to make a presentation on lesbians and breast cancer risk for its national conference last July. Haynes had done no previous research on the subject and says "It was surprising to find no one had asked the question before. I could find no reference to it in either the gay, or medical literature. It's a glaring gap in information on the disease profile of the lesbian population."

Haynes undertook an analysis of available surveys on lesbian health and behavior and compared this to a number of factors thought to be linked to breast cancer. (She limited her research to women over the age of 40, a fact not mentioned in the AP story.) Looking at a list of 20 "known" risk factors for breast cancer, Haynes found that four of these factors were more common in lesbians. Her compilation of data does not in any way suggest that sexual orientation per se, or sexual behavior itself, has anything at all to do with breast cancer risk. In addition, the relationship between "known risks" and breast cancer is more complicated than was conveyed in the AP report.

Breast cancer has been the leading cause of cancer death among women in the U.S. since the 1940s, and the pace at which the disease kills women has been increasing steadily ever since. The American Cancer Society estimates that in 1993, 182,000 women will get breast cancer and 46,000 women will die of it. The rate of cancer incidence is rising much more quickly among young African-American women than among whites. Despite decades of research, the causes of the disease remain a mystery.

Among the factors researchers say may be linked to breast cancer are: a family history of breast cancer, late age at first pregnancy, childlessness, early age at first menstrua-



Marilyn Humphries

tion, late age at menopause, a history of benign breast disease, affluence, high alcohol consumption, exposure to radiation, being single, being Jewish, "obesity," early growth spurts, and estrogen replacement therapy. There may also be a relationship between high-fat diets and breast cancer although the evidence is contradictory, with some studies linking only animal fat, and not vegetable fat to higher cancer risk.

According to Dr. Donna Spiegelman, an epidemiologist at the Harvard School of Public Health, "the reproductive risk factors hold up in study after study with remarkable consistency." That is, late age at first pregnancy, not having children, early menstruation, and late menopause. One of the ways these factors are linked is that they each contribute to a greater exposure to estrogen within the body over the course of one's life. This is one reason breast cancer researchers believe hormonal factors play a significant role in the development of the disease.

It is also one of the reasons Haynes considered lesbians to be at higher than average risk for breast cancer. According to her study, 70% of lesbians over the age of 40 have not had children. Estimates are that women who have never been pregnant have 1.5 times more risk of getting breast cancer than women who have their first child before age 20.

Dr. Nancy Krieger, a breast cancer researcher with Kaiser Permanente in California, wrote a letter to the San Francisco *Bay Times* criticizing its report on Haynes' study. In the

(never published) letter she points out that, in fact, women who have no children have the same cancer risk as those who have children later, between the ages of 25 and 29. And, interestingly, childless women have less risk than those who have a first child after age 30. "A lesbian who is never pregnant is at no higher a risk than a straight woman who never is pregnant, and both are equally at higher risk...than a lesbian who has a child at a young age," she writes in the letter.

Haynes based her analysis on ten surveys of lesbian health, including two rather large studies. One of these surveyed 2500 women who attended women's music festivals in the early 1980s, and the other, conducted in the mid-80s, questioned some 2000 lesbians in a range of settings on all aspects of their lives. Haynes reports that approximately 20 - 25% of older (over 40) lesbians could be classified as heavy drinkers, compared with about 12% of women overall (including lesbians). And, she says, women who drink heavily are 1.6 times more likely than those who do not to develop breast cancer. The evidence linking alcohol consumption to breast cancer is less than clear cut, however, with some studies indicating that only alcohol use before age 30 significantly increases risk.

The other two risk factors which Haynes found to be more common in lesbians were "excess weight" and higher education. Although no studies have been done on actual height or weight for lesbians, Haynes says "40% of older lesbians who answered the surveys said that they had a weight problem, whereas, in the general population, 20% of all women, based on actual measurements, are overweight." And, she reports, 80% of the lesbians surveyed had college level training or above. Haynes' research indicates that highly educated women are twice as likely as others to develop breast cancer.

Clearly, questions must be asked about potential biases in the particular surveys used. (We do not even know, for example, how "lesbian" was defined for the purposes of these surveys.) Since Haynes' work has not been published, such questions can't be fully addressed here. But, that aside, the relationship between these risk factors and actual development of disease is complex. According to Dr. Walter Willet, director of the long-term nurses study at the Harvard School of Public Health, while breast cancer mortality is higher for "obese" women than those of average weight, this may be because tumors tend to be diagnosed later in these women. Before menopause, greater weight is actually associated with a reduced risk of breast cancer. And the rising rate of breast cancer among young African-American women, as well as low-income women in some communities, indicates that "higher education" and "affluence" may not be very reliable flags for cancer risk, after all.

An important point to understand with regard to breast cancer, however, is that all known risk factors account for only one-third of breast cancer cases in the U.S., leading some activists to question the whole notion of "high risk factors" for breast cancer. In fact, what is "high risk" in this country, is less so in other countries. According to Krieger, "women in the U.S. who are supposedly 'low-risk' still have a greater chance of getting cancer than women in Japan who have 'high risk' factors." That's because the U.S. as a whole has a much higher breast cancer rate than Japan. When women migrate from a low-risk to a high-risk country, however, their risk of breast cancer increases to that of the new country, within two generations.

Willet believes the differences in breast cancer rates between countries indicate that as many as 80% of breast

Continued on page 11

HACKING THROUGH THE HYPE

"New" AIDS Treatment

by John S. James



Due to massive publicity about a three-drug combination that stopped HIV infection in laboratory tests concept called "convergent combination therapy" has generated more interest than any other recent development in AIDS treatment. The media handling of the story has angered some scientists and activists, who point out that the idea is not new, and that there are a number of reasons why it may work less well in people than in the laboratory at Harvard Medical School. There seems to be a rough consensus among informed observers that the development may indeed be important, that it has been overplayed by the media, and that there is nothing magic about the number three or about the particular three-drug combinations being discussed so far.

What Is Convergent Combination Therapy?

Drug combinations have long been important for many diseases which are difficult to treat — for example, cancer and tuberculosis — and AIDS experts have long suspected that HIV treatment, too, will require more than one drug. But there are different theories guiding the selection of which drugs are likely to work well together.

The usual approach has been to combine drugs which work at different stages in the life cycle of the target organism. Unfortunately this theory has had little practical test in AIDS, because all of the approved anti-HIV drugs, as well as many of the experimental ones now being tested in people, target only one point in the viral life cycle, the enzyme reverse transcriptase (which is essential for HIV reproduction, but is not found at all in uninfected human cells).

The idea behind convergent combination therapy is that carefully chosen drugs against the same target (the reverse transcriptase enzyme), may work even better together than drugs against different targets. The theory is that reverse transcriptase must perform critical functions for HIV, and if it is changed too much (in order to evade various drugs), it may not work at all.

The reason the convergent combination idea is fairly new is that it applies best to viruses — not to other disease-causing organisms such as bacteria, which have much more complex genetic machinery than viruses, including various ways to disable drugs without necessarily affecting the function which the drugs are targeting.

The Recent News

The major scientific article describing convergent combination therapy was published in *Nature*, February 18, 1993 (Chow Y-K, Hirsch MS, and others, "Use of evolutionary limitations of HIV-1 multidrug resistance to optimize therapy," pp. 650-653). This paper was based on months of careful work, with critical experiments repeated many times to be sure the results were accurate. Most of these experiments tested the three-drug combination of AZT plus ddI plus pyridinone (the Merck drug also known as L661). Successful results were also found when either nevirapine (BI-RG-587) or foscarnet were used instead of the pyridinone.

But convergent combination therapy might not work as well in people for several reasons:

- In the body, HIV infects different kinds of cells. If all three of the drugs cannot get into all of these cells, and work effectively there, the treatment would not get to where it is needed.
- New, unknown mutations might enable HIV to become resistant to any particular combination therapy. The large viral burden now known to exist in the lymph nodes during HIV infection gives plenty of chances for such a mutation to develop, if one is biologically possible. And different combinations of known mutations, other than those tested so far, might also be able to confer simultaneous resistance to drug combination without preventing the virus from reproducing.
- Reverse transcriptase inhibitors will not stop viral activity in cells which have already been infected.
- Until drug combinations are tested in people, no one can be sure they will be safe — a question which is especially critical with drugs which will have to be taken indefinitely.

Clinical Trial Plans

The major clinical trial of convergent combination therapy, named ACTG 241, is expected to begin soon at 16 sites

throughout the U.S. A total of 400 volunteers will be randomly assigned to receive either AZT plus ddI plus nevirapine, or AZT plus ddI plus a placebo. The trial will last one year.

A small study now ongoing at the University of Alabama in Birmingham is testing the same three-drug combination in eight volunteers. It is looking primarily for safety information, but also measuring p24 antigen levels and is doing viral cultures, in order to get a quick estimate of whether or not the three-drug treatment is working.

The problem with the current plans is that ACTG 241 will remain blinded for one year after the 400 volunteers are recruited — meaning that we may not know for a year and a half or more whether the three-drug combination is working. We may have only the results of the eight patients now being studied at the University of Alabama; these results are unlikely to tell us what patients (if any) most need the combination, or to support widespread changes in the standard of care. Therefore, if the treatment does work, the current plans may entail a two-year delay before the approved therapy begins to become widely available — even though two of the drugs are approved and widely used together, and the third has been tested in people for some time already. An effective national response to the AIDS epidemic would do much better than that.

What is needed now, in addition to the work currently planned, is a small, flexible, clinical study in which research physicians can use their best judgment to try to help particular patients with the combination treatment — using research-level quality control of the blood testing and other data collection and analysis. The research physicians should be able to change the treatment protocol at any time, within broad guidelines approved by an institutional review board. Such practical clinical experience under research conditions would allow the large, controlled studies to be more intelligently designed — to be based on real experience, not on statistical models built on guesswork, the way most AIDS trials today are designed. And the same real-world experience would guide the development of a "parallel track" early access program to reach those patients most likely to benefit from the new treatment, and least able to wait until the formal trial is finished. □

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LAVENDER LABOR



On Saturday, April 24, the AFL-CIO will host a pre-March reception for gay and lesbian union members at its Washington, D.C. headquarters. The event is one sign of the increasing clout of lesbian and gay labor groups, particularly in Boston, New York and San Francisco. Also growing in numbers and power are gay labor caucuses within local, regional and national unions.

Notable strides in the past year include a historic New York gathering in June of 300 lesbian and gay union members. Several area unions joined the Lesbian and Gay Labor Network of that city to host the conference, which offered a better than usual gender balance and a strong presence of African-American and Latino workers. Many of the New York unions represented—including 18 public employee locals—had supported visibility for their gay workers on the job and within the union.

And in Boston last spring, the local Teamsters Union actively sought support from the city's Gay and Lesbian Labor Activist Network (GALLAN) for its boycott of Miller beer. GALLAN endorsed the ongoing boycott and built substantial support within the community, despite some resistance from gay bar owners. The cooperative effort resulted in a new contingent for the 1992 Boston Lesbian/Gay Pride parade: GALLAN plus Local 122 of the Teamsters.

Gay labor networks are currently working toward the establishment of a national lesbian/gay labor organization. The organization will be formalized at the June 1994 National Lesbian and Gay Labor Conference. An open planning meeting for the conference takes place on Monday April 26, the day after the March. Come to talk about union and class politics in the lesbian/gay movement, as well as health care reform, workers' rights and how to redefine the concept of family benefits to include all workers.

—Ed Hunt and Susan Moir

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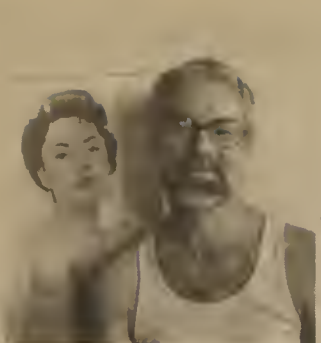
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"If you die famous, or marry someone famous, or are born to famous parents, you might wind up in the Transition column in Newsweek magazine."

TRANSITION IN NEWSWEEK

By Walta Borowski

Mel Gibson died today after battling his third bout of PCP
Sylvester Stallone succumbed to pancreatitis due to the
experimental drug ddl

Work on Eddie Murphy's newest film came to a halt when it
was discovered amoebas were eating his corneas

Arnold Schwarzenegger's struggle with wasting syndrome has
left the Republican at 80 pounds despite his \$500 a
day nourishment treatment

Tom Cruise was been unable to eat solid food for four months
because of a pesky candida of the throat

Larry Bird's neuropathy has ended every sports lover's delight
at seeing such a tall white man run around in little shorts

Tom Selleck's toxoplasmosis and lymphoma have made insurance on
his new film with Goldie Hawn unlikely, although Ms. Hawn
in a rare interview said that after seeing Kurt Russell
tied to his bed in a diaper she can handle anything.

Matthew Modine's short struggle against progressive multifocal
leukoencephalopathy ended today. Fortunately he was blind
and demented and did not know he wouldn't live to skip rope
in a jock strap in Vision Quest II, which now goes
to Matt Dillon if the CD4 trial keeps him fit

Mr. Rogers has killed himself after severe frustration at being
unable to figure out what plastic discs had to do with the
slit holes on his cardigan sweater

Pee Wee Herman died today of toxic shock after flying to China
on his special bike to try the cucumber. Before leaving the
Playhouse he told the kids that his AZT would keep him safe
until the cure. CURE!! shouted the flowers and Globie
the talking globe. CURE!! shouted Chairie the chair,
who would miss Pee Wee's little butt. CURE!! shouted
Jombie the Genie, whose dementia had made him lose touch
with his pawers. CURE!! shouted Mrs. Renee, who
was tired of having no gay male friends and never got
out of her quilted housecoat anymore. CURE!! shouted the
King of Cartoons and for absolutely everyone but Cowboy Curtis,
dead of massive internal KS. CURE!! was the secret word
that day

23-24 May 1990

VITAL SIGNS xxxii

By Essex Hemphill

In an election year
my kisses
gain political currency
in a context
in which I'm portrayed
as the threat most critical,
most menacing to the values
of family and flag.

I am the new Communism.
The cause for declining profits
on Wall Street. I am the reason
God is punishing America.
I am Sodom and Gomorrah.
Willie Horton. Violent Crime
Crack. AIDS.

My erections are SCUD Missiles
aimed at the suburbs, the pulpits,
the shopping malls where
the mythical family gathers.
My anus is not a safe house,
my soul is, that's my blessing.
I have no quilt for my bed,
no red ribbons for your hair.
I live to sabotage patriarchy,
dismantle it

with lusty homo kisses,
buttfuck-it to its knees
because the other options
are much more violent
if I should choose them.

© 1993 Essex Hemphill from *Vital Signs*

FOR VERA WOODBURY (1955- 1992)

By Minnie Bruce Pratt

She says, "The thing I fear about this illness is
I'll never run the highway again. I loved driving
the roads, those long trips." Her head thrown back
against the reclining chair, as if a stinging wind
sweeps up the dirt road through a car window,
as if the sun burns her deep into the country, down
to a lake clear as air where she swims naked
with a lover, their cool dark shadows gliding
like crows flying toward the thunderheads overhead.

Quiet settles like dust behind her words,
but in the sterile room only the fan pumps air
out, out, out, filtering back hiss. The visitor
sits wrapped in paper, with feet, face, body masked.
No honeysuckle from beside the road allowed,
no dusty rose. And before the first kiss or any touch,
the disinfecting soap, the cloying green slick.

Eyes closed, she whispers to a radio song, "Maureen—
you were a souped up car in that rent-a-go-cart town.
Maureen—now you'll never meet my new friends."

Eyes closed, smiling, she's on a road out of the room.
Sunglasses on and cool, she heads into shimmering
heat above the asphalt, leaving behind the girls and women
she lifted her chin and said *Honey* to, the ones who just wanted
to see her smile. The watching visitor is left behind
as she starts towards the humid darkness of summer night,
her eyes on some sweetsmelling invisible horizon,
singing, "Maureen, I miss you. You were my best friend."

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Avengers

Continued from page 4

organizing. We wanted every lesbian who gets our materials to understand that this movement is something that has never existed before and that they are invited. The first image we chose was our logo -- a bomb. Later we took the slogan "We Recruit." We do all of our fundraising by having parties, advertised with fabulous posters and massive wheat-pastings. The parties tell us how much the community supports us and we try to use the parties to build for future actions. Our New Year's Eve party poster featured Pam Grier, 1960's star of Blaxploitation films, in hot pants, a big Afro and a sawed-off shotgun with the slogan "Activist A-Go-Go." Over a thousand women turned up to support us.

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For more information or a copy of our manifesto or The Lesbian Avenger Handbook, call us at 212-967-7711 ex 3204 or write c/o Lesbian and Gay Community Center, 208 W 13th St., NY 10011. What have you got to lose?

Breast cancer

Continued from page 7

cancer cases can be attributed to non-genetic factors. He and other researchers believe that breast cancer develops as a complex interplay of genetics, hormonal factors, and environmental exposures, and is probably strongly influenced by one's age at the time of exposure to potential carcinogens. For example, there is a strong correlation between exposure to ionizing radiation during adolescence and later development of breast cancer.

Several new studies indicate that possible environmental risks for breast cancer include exposure to organochlorine pesticides like DDT and chlordane (used in homes to kill termites), radiation from nuclear power plants and nuclear bomb testing, and electromagnetic fields from high-voltage power lines. Dr. Mary Wolff, a chemist at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York, recently completed a study that found 40-50% higher levels of DDT and other chemicals in the breast fat of women who had cancer compared to women who did not.

Dr. Devra Lee Davis, also at Mt. Sinai, believes that the common link between many of the known risk factors may be compounds called xeno-estrogens. These are substances that "while foreign to the body, once taken in to the body, increase the total amount of estrogens you are exposed to." The organochlorine pesticides fall into this category. This hypothesis may help explain the connection between high fat diets and breast cancer. Pesticides like DDT are widespread in the environment, particularly in regions where the soil is sandy and where they were heavily used for agriculture, such as on Long Island farms in the 1950s. They concentrate in the food chain, are stored in fat, and can persist in the body for a person's lifetime. So, a person living in an exposed region, consuming a diet high in animal fats, would have greater "body burdens" of these chemicals in her own fat tissue.

All of this is not to say that lesbians, in general, may not have a greater risk than other women of getting breast cancer. And, Haynes' review of the literature indicates that lesbians are less likely than other women to have regular clinical breast exams or mammograms, possibly contributing to later diagnosis with the disease. But to "walk around thinking you have a one in three chance of getting cancer just because you are a lesbian is wrong, it's crazy, it's not right, and it's not helpful," says Dr. Nancy Krieger. She points out that one's reproductive history, one's exposure to environmental chemicals, and other still

unknown factors are all potentially important contributors to one's cancer risk.

While Krieger believes it is important and appropriate to determine if lesbians, because of a higher combination of certain risk factors, are at higher risk, that can't be done until there are real, well-designed studies based on data from real lesbian lives. And, "while it may be true that lesbians are less likely to get adequate routine health care (including breast exams) because of a homophobic health care system, improving access to non-homophobic care is a more constructive response than representing questionable statistical data in fearmongering headlines."

But Spiegelman believes that while Haynes' figures may be a bit high, lesbians and all women ought to be concerned. "One in nine is a fearsome statistic. Anything worse than that, be it 1 in 8, 7, 6, ...is even more fearsome. We have reason to be afraid." Susan Hestor, of the Mary-Helen Mautner Project for Lesbians with Cancer in D.C. says she hopes the controversy over the report won't take away from the central message of Haynes' work, that "there is a breast cancer epidemic in this country. There is a potential that it does affect us more than straight women. As lesbians we often take care of other people, we've taken care of our parents, we've taken care of people with AIDS....Now we've got to take what we've learned in both the women's self-help movement and the AIDS movement and take responsibility for our own health."

Hestor urges all women to learn and practice breast self-exams and to get yearly clinical exams. (Hestor supports regular mammography as well, although recent reports suggest there are no proven benefits of mammograms for women under the age of 50, in terms of reducing cancer deaths.) Meanwhile, an increasingly vocal alliance of cancer activists and environmentalists are demanding that the search start now for the real "high risk" factors, so we can actually begin to stem the tide of breast cancer deaths. □

Oregon

Continued from page 3

who developed a speakers' bureau because the campaign didn't have one. "Speak Out Oregon" trained 60 to 100 people statewide. They wrote all of the organizations they could think of: the Chamber of Commerce, the local Kiwanis club. They wrote all of the newspapers and radio stations, saying "we want to come speak, we are willing to debate, willing to be on your radio show."

There were all kinds of other people who did extraordinary things. Librarians held a march and rally on their own with highly symbolic gestures about how books were going to be banned and burned. There were so many groups like that--psychological associations, the nurses, the social workers, the therapists, group after group after group.

I think what probably moved them the most was their lesbian and gay members who had the courage to get up and say "I am a lesbian," or "I am gay," and "this is what we need to do at this point." They did that at great risk. The labor unions did a great job.

Crisis Campaigns: Lessons for the Future

There is one more thing I'd like to say about other states facing campaigns. I think that the biggest problem in this kind of organizing is that people organize as if it is a crisis and they organize as if it is a candidate campaign. If you treat it as just a crisis, you make decisions based on expediency. You start marginalizing people. You make some really tough decisions that harm people and violate the "do no harm" bottom-line.

Finally, it's important that people have a discussion early on about not choosing between winning a ballot and creating a movement, but saying "we can have both—we can have it all," and about figuring out how to do it. There is a grand opportunity to build movements, but that means that you don't sacrifice people here and there, or use people just to get the vote. For example, if I were running a campaign this year I would hire a volunteer coordinator immediately because the more people you can incorporate and the more you can give them their own sense of power and authority, the more we're going to have a movement. The more you can bring people together as allies, the more we're going to have a movement.

We have to recognize that the religious Right has a long-term agenda and that this is not just this year--this is going to be a long-term struggle. □

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